

Talking Leaves



The Institute for Earth Education

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Last Child in the Woods... or The Last Woods in the Child?

Richard Louv has performed a wonderful service for our societies in putting nature experience back on the agenda for healthy childhood development. Unfortunately, it is mostly nature education from the last century, a throwback to the kind of nature experience Louv remembers and a lot of old-timers in our field still practice: identifying, collecting, journaling, habitat creation, nature trails, tracking, water testing, gardening, wild edibles, outdoor classrooms, bird feeders, etc. (These are Louv's examples cited in his wildly popular book, *Last Child in the Woods*, not mine.) The nature study reactionaries in our field will love this book, tucking it under their pillows at night, and citing it endlessly in their attempts to get someone to pay for these pursuits again.

Louv documents what he calls "nature deficit disorder" so well, and writes in such a gentle style, that it's difficult to see beneath the surface and discern what kind of remedy he is advocating. Certainly, we have no problem with his description of the malady; it's the cure we find wanting. Four individuals highlighted in *Last Child in the Woods* suggest Louv's underlying view of nature education:

David Sobel –

Although we agree with Sobel on the importance of place-based education (our "Rangers of the Earth" program was designed with this in mind), and rich, first-hand contact with nature (we are the "Acclimatization" folks, after all), we have seen no evidence that youngsters have an ecological phobia of sorts because of all the gloom and doom about our planet. In fact, we have always found that conveying some sense that their planet is



"an independent voice in the educational side of the environmental movement"

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in ecological trouble (appropriate to their age level), and needs their help, will energize them, not scare them off. That doesn't mean we support a lot of gloom and doom for youngsters. We have written ourselves about the dangers of issues-driven environmental education, and spoken out repeatedly that many youngsters today learn a lot about the rainforest and know nothing about their forest. However, Sobel provides little guidance for why this might be so. Maybe it's because the rainforest is somewhere else – like in another hemisphere – and thus it is safe and secure to talk about it here. Teachers don't have to leave the building, and they don't have to risk upsetting anyone should their students observe that the forest nearby is being encroached upon. I wish Sobel would have addressed “nature-phobia” among students, teachers, administrators, and parents. That would have been a more important contribution.

We just don't think “ecophobia” is a significant problem. The major problem in our field is that there are so few genuine instructional programs and ecophobia just plays into the hands of those who want to get by with little more than “messing around” out there. Personally, I grew up with a lot of kids messing around in natural settings, and as far as I know, none of them turned out to be serious environmentalists. How many do you know from your childhood?

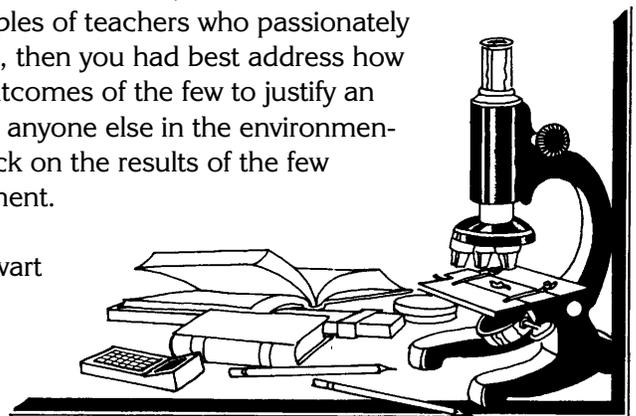
Robin Moore —

Louv cites Moore's work, who posits that nature experiences “help children understand the realities of natural systems through primary experience.” Moore goes on to suggest such experiences “... demonstrate natural principles such as networks, cycles, and evolutionary processes.” Really? If this was true, then all those kids growing up building forts and tree houses would likely understand the systems of life. But they don't. It's not the experience that counts, but the outcome that experience achieves. When I was out there as a boy trying to “catch and cache”, I may have been developing some feelings for nature that I didn't recognize at the time, but I assure you I wasn't learning natural principles of networking and cycles. Please remember, all those youngsters messing around in nature in the 50's were the same kids who contributed so much to its destruction in the 80's. It's not messing around in nature that makes the difference, but how you perceive what you are messing around with.

Gerald Lieberman —

Lieberman says, “For a long time we talked about knowledge leading to behavior, instead we believe that behavior leads to behavior.” The problem is behavior often doesn't lead to much overall ecological understanding, and thus has limited transferability. Students learn something about a particular issue, but not the overall systems of life which underlie all such issues. **Environmental issues are symptoms of our lack of systems understanding.** And what knowledge students do gain in this way is often so narrow that their efforts can be quickly discredited. As a result, the behavior itself is frequently a short-term counterfeit action when it comes to the bigger picture. This approach may work for some, but it misses most. Of course, if you gather your supportive data using examples of teachers who passionately fire up their students to tackle an issue and affect change, then you had best address how to get lots of teachers to do this, rather than using the outcomes of the few to justify an approach **not** taken by the many. Neither Lieberman, nor anyone else in the environmental education movement has done this; they just piggyback on the results of the few teachers who happen to have an environmental commitment.

We have always felt that every school has one or two stalwart souls who will burn brightly like this for environmental causes, but this is not what environmental education bases its methodology upon. Environmental education theorizes that every teacher will infuse all subjects and





lessons with an environmental perspective. That's why environmental education claims we don't need programs. Not surprisingly perhaps, they are undeterred by all the studies indicating their approach does not work, but when you are sucking on the government teat for your sustenance, it is almost impossible to open your mouth and let go. That's why government keeps getting larger and larger, and the environmental movement more and more co-opted. People will not open their mouths.

Paul Dayton —

Quoting from a paper by Dayton, a professor of oceanography, Louv sets up his contention that we need more academic coursework in the natural sciences, or, at least, it appears this is what he is advocating. His reportorial instincts lead him to back off in taking a position on so many things that it's hard to tell. Dayton says, "We must reinstate natural science courses in all our academic institutions to insure that students experience nature first-hand and are instructed in the fundamentals of the natural sciences." Why will natural science courses insure that students experience nature first-hand? They certainly didn't do so in my day. In fact, my secondary and university biology courses had no field work at all (preferring to have us dissect animals in the lab instead at the high school level, and sit in a huge, artificially lit lecture hall at university), and ended up with a stultifying lack of emphasis upon the ecological systems and communities which characterize our planet. And what are these "fundamentals" Dayton believes we should be learning? I wish he would make us a list, then reorient natural science instruction to helping us learn them instead of the minutiae each "science" seems to prefer.

*"Imagine for a moment
a dense, lush forest
filled with sunlight."*

-Carved into a lecture hall desk
Dalhousie University
Nova Scotia, Canada

Louv concludes from all this that "a sense of wonder and joy in nature should be at the very center of ecological literacy," then implies that for the reform necessary to do this "there will need to be a rebirth of natural history in the academy." Astonishing! We would suggest that it was natural history as taught in most academies that contributed so much to the destruction of a sense of wonder and joy in nature for most learners, but Louv would have us believe this is a key to our salvation.

In developing his thesis, Louv doesn't seem to distinguish among outdoor experiences. Any experience in nature is good for him. But in this age of dwindling educational time and money, we have to do better than this. Louv offers no help here. In fact, he supports unstructured experiences in nature over and over in his book, then bewails that no one is learning one of the most structured approaches of all: naming things. You cannot help but marvel at Louv's ability to seek out and distill so many studies illuminating his concerns about a nature deficit disorder, but when it comes to justifying naming things, he falls back on that old saw about meeting new friends. He even quotes a biology teacher who says, "One of my students told me that every time she learns the name of a plant, she feels as if she is meeting someone new. Giving a name to something is a way of knowing it." I don't think so. It's a way of knowing its name, just like we know the names of people without knowing them. Does Louv really believe that if I cannot name the plants in his San Diego arroyos that I won't fight for their survival? What about all the endangered plants in other parts of the world?

Just because some of us who grew up building forts for our contact with nature (in reality, often a destructive, insensitive experience) doesn't mean that youngsters today cannot get the same contact in more



positive ways. However, instead of seeking those alternatives, in some circles there seems to be a return to the “killing fields” mentality in nature education: using knives, making primitive hunting tools, capturing animals, etc. Does this really advance a low-impact relationship with nature, or just reinforce an outdated utilitarian view of it?

Louv’s book should have been titled, “Last Woods in the Child,” because it reflects his personal memories with the woods of his own childhood, but that’s an experience lots of young people no longer enjoy. For a host of reasons, many of which Louv explains well, the “woods” are no longer available to many youngsters. Will a natural play space, a derelict strip of abused land in the city, or a required university course in the natural sciences, produce an environmentally literate and ecologically passionate citizenry? We doubt it. In fact, will any of these even suffice for embedding the “woods” again in most youngsters? Unlikely. Granted, Louv wants more nature-education preserves, but what kind of education will take place in such preserves? Based on everything else he says, and the examples he cites, one has to conclude it will be traditional nature education. His examples of good things are not along the lines of can someone explain energy flow in a community of life, or what makes up the difference in volume between an acorn and the branch of the oak it fell from, but can someone identify an osprey, or name the sky-blue aster. In one of his most stunning assertions, Louv asks, “What if a tree fell in the forest and no one knew its biological name? Did it exist?” This cannot be a serious question, can it? Sadly, when it comes to those working in our field, it is instructional rigor and assessment that seem to fall in the forest un-named.

I feel like a Grinch. Louv’s well-written work has done so much to raise awareness about the growing lack of contact with nature among youngsters today, and his use of the term “nature deficit disorder” is so brilliant and media-savvy, that I hesitated for a long time to say much about it at all. In fact, the first time I read *Last Child in the Woods*, I came away feeling this was an important contribution to the work of nature lovers everywhere. However, I also had an unsettling feeling that there was something wrong with this book. On the surface, he was saying much of the same thing we have been saying for decades: the growing human isolation and alienation from natural systems and communities does not bode well for a biotically rich planet in space. It was only during a second and third reading that I began to grasp the problem. Louv sees the disorder, but not the cure.

In all his detailed research, did Louv not find anything beyond the rather tired traditional nature study activities he cites? Most of them could have been lifted from a handbook of nature study published before television became ubiquitous, let alone the electronic revolution. (He seems to place great stock in creativity, but apparently could not locate much of it in nature education today.) You have to wonder why he didn’t run across anything innovative out there, including earth education. Our programs are underway now in a dozen languages, and our activities, or versions of them, are used in nature centers everywhere, but evidently, the lens in Louv’s traditional nature study glasses did not allow him to see us. Or was it because he was glued to the rear view mirror of his own childhood?

Last Child in the Woods is a nostalgic view of nature experience as it was once upon a time in a less populated, more rural country. But just try putting population control on your agenda. Go ahead, I dare you. One of our members tried to get an environmental education center in Florida to put a simple graph on the wall showing the relationship between our planet’s increasing population and its decreasing species. The center wouldn’t touch his idea. He seemed surprised, but we thought his naiveté was endearing. He really believed an EE center would be swayed by a careful, calm rationale for such a mildly provocative display. But when it comes to anything that might jeopardize funding, the superficial will trump the authentic every time in EE-land.



In short, Louv makes it sound like all we have to do is to involve the participants in nature again, in any fashion whatsoever, and teach them the names of things. That's why his book is so popular in our field. It doesn't demand much of anything from us. But meaningful nature immersion is just not that simple. It's the kind of immersion that makes the difference, and what you do with it afterwards. Evidently, Louv's kind worked for him at some level, but untold thousands of youngsters had the same kind of immersion as Louv, and they promptly left it behind in their quest for what passes as success in our societies. Now Louv would have us expend a huge amount of time and resources replicating the experience of his childhood, when that experience only worked for a small percentage of his contemporaries. Is this really the best we can do in the 21st century? Think about it.

It is always interesting to see what people take away from a book, but apparently, one of the main things this book has spawned is a desire to create more natural play spaces. That's got to be a good thing in some ways. But having a nature center build a natural play space is a kind of oxymoron, isn't it? I thought nature centers were supposed to be natural play spaces. Unfortunately, that's not true today. Many of them have become little more than supersized Elizabethan and Victorian cabinets of curiosities for those with the financial means to enjoy and support them. Creating a natural play space within a nature center may well be an indication that the site is bereft of ideas for making meaningful connections between kids and nature. That's sad. Here's how one of our colleagues expressed her view when asked about such play spaces: "They are interesting and would be great for child care places that don't have access to anything fun and natural, but they are never going to substitute for real contact with real natural places, and I find it immensely frustrating that nature centers would even want to build them instead of getting kids out in the real thing." And please remember that many of the positive examples that Louv cites are not of youngsters in natural play spaces, but youngsters in solitary contact with the percolating panoply of nature in a full-blown natural community. Is that so hard to provide?

Since we exist in a largely unstructured field that is dependent on the next gimmick or game for its intellectual fuel, nature-deficit disorder fits the bill perfectly for many people, especially as it requires so little new effort. We just have to keep doing what we've always done, but now we can promote it as addressing a disorder. Brilliant. We can only hope that there are some new leaders out there somewhere trying out something that reaches more youngsters in more meaningful ways. Once again, I don't want to overlook Louv's contribution. His exposition of the problem is priceless, but his solution misses the mark by a country mile.

Steve Van Matre
international chair

